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GIVING IT ALL: A Pastoral Theology of Stewardship

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"The only thing that is growing in mainline Protestantism is the literature on its decline." So observes Michael Jinkins, Academic Dean at Austin Theological Seminary in a speech and essay, *Stewards of the Future of God's Church.* Probably the last thing any of us needs is more rhetoric on the phenomenon which is the defining reality of the church in our time. Anyone who is anyone has weighed in already:

Loren Mead, *A Paradigm Lost*
Willimon and Haverwas
Leander Keck and of course
Coalter, Mulder and Weeks — in *The Presbyterian Presence* — chronicle the "apparent demise of our once indominatable denomination which lost 28% of its members in two decades, and

now is cheered and encouraged when the annual membership loss is not quite as large as last year's.

In a sermon on the Church in his latest book, *Secrets in the Dark,* Frederick Buechner says: "Maybe the best thing that could happen to the Church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash all that away — the church building tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too" (p. 153).

Buechner's eloquent imaging sounds sometimes like exactly what is happening to the Presbyterian Church (USA). Thanks be to God, however, my primary experience of church is a congregation, a traditional, Presbyterian mainline congregation that is vital, vigorous, diverse, generous, very much alive and growing. So it occurs to me regularly these days, I confess, that mainline Protestantism isn't dying at all. There are churches all over the country like Fourth Church; they are not all conservative or liberal, evangelical or progressive, they are on both sides of the sexual orientation/ordination issue. They are alive and well — and because they are not

struggling to survive, investing every resource: money, energy, imagination simply trying to make it another year — they may be custodians of the tradition, the denomination, for a while at least.

What we like to do, of course, is blame someone. The far right has made a cottage industry out of the politics of blame, targeting — liberals, liberalism and, always, over and over, in speeches, books, newsletters, conferences, newspapers, the *Layman*, the print media read by more Presbyterians than any other — targeting headquarters, national staff, Louisville. It's a game — continue to critique, undermine, question the integrity of, destroy trust in the denomination and then gleefully report that people are angry, don't trust church leaders and revenue is down. There has never been anything quite like it, I think, in our long history.

My observation is that the continuing decline of the mainline churches, particularly our own, is nobody's fault. Rather we are caught in the middle of vast sociological, economic, political and demographic change.

One of the most important of those changes was described by Robert Putnam's now famous study, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse of American Community*. Fewer and fewer people, suddenly, are joining organizations and attending meetings. Elks, Masons, VFW posts, even the venerable PTA, the greatest voluntary association triumph of the 20th century, peaked in 1959 and then, in the next two decades, lost all of its astonishing membership gains.

At the same time — spirituality, essentially a solitary phenomenon, replaced traditional religious observance. Robert Bellah's *Sheilaism* defined it. Sheila Larson, remember, was one of his interviewees we all loved to quote. Sheila said she didn't go to church — rather listening to her own small voice. Her religion she said, so eloquently and so quotably — was "Sheilaism."

Wade Clark Roof helped us see that we are dealing with a generation of seekers not joiners. And none of this huge sociological change was caused by us.

My opinion, for what it's worth, is that we haven't paid nearly enough attention to demographics. A simple illustration: I grew up in a Presbyterian Church in Altoona, Pennsylvania, a thriving, prosperous railroad town of 85,000 — completely dominated by the Pennsylvania Railroad. The railroad, car shops, repair shops, test plants, engine shops which produced the K4 steam engine, employed 20,000 people. Because Altoona was so critical to the entire transportation network in the East — we were told — that the Germans had us high on the priority list for bombing. It made us proud. Presbyterians are more dense in Western Pennsylvania than anywhere else, we used to say. And so — in that hard working, blue collar town there were no fewer than six Presbyterian congregations. First Presbyterian, downtown, where the Railroad Executives, bankers and doctors belonged, a congregation of more than 1,000. Second Presbyterian, Third Presbyterian, old, solid congregations of several hundred, Broad Avenue Presbyterian — my church, maybe 500 members, Ward Avenue Presbyterian, Juniata Presbyterian — a little smaller, but vital, never without full time ministers. Six vital Presbyterian congregations in a prosperous industrial town of 85,000.

What happened to Altoona's Presbyterian Churches had nothing to do with theology or ecclesiology, certainly nothing to do with who is ordained and who is not. What happened to the Presbyterian Church in Altoona was the diesel engine and the Interstate Highway system. Diesel engines were built by Westinghouse — somewhere else — maintained and repaired somewhere else, and were quite capable of pulling freight trains up over the first steep range of the Alleghenies — without adding puller and pusher engines — a necessity in the day of steam engines — and the sole reason Altoona was settled in the first place. At the same time trucks and automobile travel on new highways — made railroading, at the time at least, almost an anachronism. In retrospect it was a huge national miscalculation. But it all happened rapidly. Thirty passenger trains a day, stopping in Altoona, became 20, then 10, then 4, today 1. Freight is moving again, but the system doesn't need Altoona.

And so 85,000 slowly declined — to about 50,000 today. Several of those Presbyterian churches closed. First and Broad Avenue, with a total of 1,500 in the early '50s each had a congregation of 150 or

so. They have now merged to create a new church. I don't think we pay enough attention to the fact that in places like Altoona, the Presbyterian Church lost almost the exact percentage of members as the town itself lost population.

The demographic change is different in other places, but critical nonetheless — In Chicago, New York, Pittsburgh — urban neighborhoods have changed several times. Once vibrant congregations of 300-400 are now hanging on for dear life trying to survive. We have a neighborhood parish model that doesn't work very well and a system of governance that seems to preclude creativity and the ability to try something new.

In the meantime, at the national level the old denomination is changing in front of our eyes. Long gone is the mid-20th century paradigm of church as corporation, with a New York corporate headquarters, divisional directors, presiding over programs carried out by national staff, making policy decisions, allocating resources from corporate offices in a building we helped construct just like other national corporations — and to the dedication of which we

summoned one of our communicant members, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who came and spoke.

I loved it — all of it and mourn its passing. Change happened. The old model doesn't reflect a whole new way of thinking and acting. When people at Fourth Presbyterian Church want to do mission in the world, they are not inclined to take up a collection and send the money to Louisville. They are much more inclined to decide where to go and what to do and then go do it. And so Fourth Church members went to Guatemala, got involved in a school; other members and work groups followed. So did money. Recently two members, a pharmacist from Cameroon and a recently retired AIDS doctor, both members of the congregation, met, shared their hopes and dreams, contacted other friends, raised a little money — went to Cameroon and in conjunction with the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon, set up an AIDS clinic. Dr. Bernie Blaauw is still there. It simply never occurred to them to call Louisville and ask for the Africa desk of Worldwide Ministries. And, when late in the game I was brought into the conversation and suggested we at least let our denomination know what we were doing, the result was, for understandable reason, not particularly helpful.

It is very complicated. The PC (USA) is a player in international ecumenical mission circles. Our people have experience and credibility. But they, and we, have to learn new ways of doing mission, new ways of being church. So I urge you to keep Cliff Kirkpatrick and Linda Valentine on your daily prayer list.

I think the Presbyterian presence in our culture is precious. In his fine little book, *The Protestant Voice in American Pluralism*, Martin Marty says we no longer run the show. Once we did but no longer. In fact the show itself has changed radically. But, Marty says, we are still a critically important part of the national landscape. It is in mainline churches that the world sees a religion that is not afraid to think critically, not afraid to engage science — dialogically, not in hostility. It is in mainline churches that the world sees a religion that focuses on hospitity, love and service, not combat, conquest, victory.

It is in mainline churches that the world sees a radical alternative to the market economy that reduces everything, even religion, to a matter of understanding the market, discerning what potential

customers want and giving it to them. I am not ordinarily a critic of the megachurches except when they announce confidently that God wants you to have what you want: that an awesome God wants you to have happy and rich. Or when their sense of the current market leads them to take shots at us. One of the best of the Megachurches — in a Chicago suburb — decided recently to come downtown. I welcome that — made a point of welcoming the new pastor. I think they do things we can't do and get people in the door who won't come to our place. I have a suspicion that after a while we'll get them — but that's another story. The suburban megachurch hired the Auditorium Theatre, set up a stage, screen, band — and then rented several prominent billboards downtown . . . huge pictures of several attractive young women in tights, either doing liturgical dance or stretching exercises, the background all pastel and sparkly with a huge inscription, "This is Church?" I confess I wanted to rent an adjacent billboard and show a picture of a homeless person being fed, a city child being tutored and an elderly hospital patient receiving communion with the inscription: "No. This is Church."

It is in mainline churches that the world sees a religion that takes God's world seriously, the world of

nature, God's good but fragile creation, and the world of the human race, the human city: politics, economics, the arts: education, healthcare, justice.

It is only at a conference like this one that one would dare say it — but it may be that you and I, the people in this room, will be for awhile, custodians of the tradition: as the monasteries kept part of the tradition alive as the world radically changed around them in the Middle Ages. So maybe God wants you and I and our congregations to keep alive and well that small but precious part of the kingdom called Presbyterian.

Walter Brueggemann says we are in exile and reminds us that exile is not necessarily a bad place to be: that when God's people are in exile they become creative, energetic, nimble, brave, faithful and on occasion joyful.

And so I remain hopeful.

Frederick Buechner proposed that maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away . . . but then he caught me, got to me as he so consistently

does, with this — "Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place."

Leading these congregations of ours becomes then a critically important task and I believe it depends on our understanding our vocation as a call to faithful following — understanding that we are, in some way, as Bonhoeffer said, called to come and die: which he knew was the way to be fully alive, fully human: called to give it all.

One of the occupational hazards that comes along with this profession is that people are curious about how we made our vocational decisions, and how we live our lives in what they assume must be an odd cocoon, hermetically sealed off from life as they experience and live it, especially the fun parts. I saw lifelong friends at a high school and college reunion recently, people I hadn't seen in decades and the question came, over and over, as it has over the years: "Are you still a minister?"

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall has written a delightful and helpful little memoir, *Bound and Free*. In it he tells how he came to be a minister

and then a theologian. I laughed when he described so eloquently an experience we all share in this business. On a flight to California he took his seat beside a businessman occupied with a file of important looking papers with the IBM logo on them. Hall was immediately pleased: his seatmate would be too busy to talk and he, Hall, would be free to read the book he had brought along. But to his chagrin, the man initiated a conversation. As a defensive maneuver Hall asked the man about his work which, of course, stimulated a reciprocal question — the dreaded, inevitable "And what do you do?"

"Now I must tell you" Hall wrote, "that usually when that question is put to me en route, I — well — I lie. I sometimes say I am a teacher of philosophy, or literature, subjects about which I know a little. I do not lie out of sheer perversity but because when you tell someone about your profession, if you are a minister, or anything like that, your partner in conversation immediately hides himself in pious talk."

Or — I find, chooses the occasion either to debate, ask profound questions — what is it about an airplane seat that liberates ordinary people to talk about the meaning of life and death? — or, on occasion to

confess. Not long ago, I glanced over to see what my seatmate was reading, a bad habit of mine, but I can't seem to resist the temptation. He was reading a newsletter, *Creation Science*, and I couldn't help but notice the headline describing an article about why evolution was not true. I was reading something religious — I think it was *Leaving Church*. As I was surreptitiously looking at what he was reading, he was stealing a glimpse at my reading material and I knew I was in for a long flight. — and I was. He couldn't resist the challenge: "What do you think about evolution?" he asked. I considered pretending that I was deaf and dumb, but of course mumbled something about it making sense to me and off we went.

My strategy is to avoid rather than lie ever since I heart Martin Marty tell the story of a friend of his on a long flight to Taiwan, whose seatmate asked the inevitable, "What do you do?" and who instead of saying "I'm a Lutheran minister," thought he would shut the conversation down with "I'm a neurosurgeon." "Wonderful" his seatmate responded, "so am I!"

People are curious about how we decide to do what we do and underneath it, I believe is a deep and

enduring sense that it is perhaps the most important decision any one of us ever makes. People want to know — does God have anything to do with this? Is there a plan for me somewhere? If so, how do I know what it is?

It is our topic — insofar as people customarily assume that if anyone is certain about a call, a vocation — it must be us. But my experience is that it is their topic as well, and that when we talk about vocation, they listen intently.

The assumption used to be that God calls clergy and leaves everyone else to their own devices when it comes to deciding what to do with their lives. In fact for centuries we pretty much appropriated the word. To have a vocation meant to be a clergy or a nun. Luther and Calvin, thanks be to God, broke out of that centuries-old paradigm with the radical idea that God's call comes to all people: that everyone has a vocation: that God's call comes in the form of the skills and abilities we are given, and our interests and passions. God calls everyone to live a fully human and faithful life. Everyone has work to do. Some of us get paid to do it — which is perhaps the best blessing of all, but God's call comes to physicians, lawyers,

teachers, police officers, laborers. Mothers tenderly nurturing children and creating a home are doing God's work every bit as much as the minister or priest, Hall says, echoing Martin Luther.

And Buechner who tells about his own vocational struggles over the years put it famously —"The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

I was interested to observe that Barbara Brown Taylor intimates at least that her vocation involved leaving church, or leaving parish ministry at least. Taylor says what God calls each of us to is fully human life. Our vocation, she says, is to be fully human.

That is the issue for each of us, regardless of how we earn our living. And the Christian secret, the very heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that becoming fully human involves giving your life away. Ever since I first read it years ago I have been captivated and compelled by Bonhoeffer's "When Christ calls a man he calls him to come and die." There was a considerable distance between Bonhoeffer standing up to Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich and my modest little church in the Calumet region of

Northern Indiana, but even there — when opportunities to die for Christ were fairly limited, I knew it was the central issue. Since that time I have come to believe it even more deeply. The heart of the truth that saves us, the truth that calls us, the heart of the only message we have is that you gain your life when you give it away.

When a young man asked him one time what he had to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus could not have been more clear — sell all you have and give it away: give it all and come follow me. It is the radical good news — for us and for our people.

I keep on file an old column by the late Erma Bombeck, "What's' Saved is Lost:"

> **"I came from a family of savers who were sired by poverty and raised in the Great Depression and who worshiped at the altar of self-denial.**
>
> **"Throughout the years, I've seen a fair number of my family who have died leaving candles that have never been lit, appliances**

that never got out of the box and new sofas shrouded in chenille bedspreads."

When I read that I couldn't help remember the first new car I ever owned, a 1963 Chevrolet Bel Air — and the plastic seat covers I purchased, and the fact that when I traded it in years later, no one had ever sat on an unprotected seat. They were as good as new!

"It gets to be a habit" Bombeck said, "After a while you have dreams you hide away — plans — compliments. I have learned that silverware tarnishes when it isn't used, perfume turns to alcohol, candles melt over the summer, and ideas that are saved for a dry week often become dated."

Have you ever done it: saved a good idea for a future sermon instead of spending it, giving it away? I have — I've had ideas I thought were so good I decided not to waste them in August but save them for November. And one time I was reading Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* — which I believe ought to be on the preacher's required reading list. Her words lept off the page:

“One of the few things I know about writing (substitute living) — is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later time in the book, or another book: give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it all. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes” (p. 78-79).

The name we have given for this, of course, is stewardship — what Hall calls “beating the drum for money.” We all do it. We’re pretty good at it.

But beneath it all, I have come to believe is the very essence of the Gospel and the very essence of our own vocation.

Have you noticed as I have the number of journal and magazine and periodical articles recently on the

subject of happiness? There is even a new academic discipline called "Happiness Science" and the essence of it is that happiness seems to occur as a byproduct, not when it is pursued, but when, quite the opposite, it is forgotten in a life devoted to and consumed by giving. What an amazing discovery.

We've known it for 2,000 years, ever since a man said:

> **"Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will find it."**